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ABSTRACT

This paper is a description of a college-level instructional program put into operation in the face of the obvious need for individualization of foreign language instruction. The program represents a compromise solution between the limitations presented by institutions and students on the one hand, and the need for greater flexibility on the other. The program consists of an options procedure, whereby the instructor determines the goals for the course and sets up a limited number of tasks, or options, by which students may reach the goals. The instructor assigns a specific number of points to each task. Students then choose as many options as they wish, and grades are computed on the number of points earned. The program's advantages are that it is manageable by one instructor; it calls for no more than the usual resources; it accomodates itself to certain institutional regulations; and it compromises in the matter of individualization in various manners. (Author/AM)

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INDIVIDUALIZATION OF INSTRUCTION IN COLLEGE BASIC FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE COURSES: A MANAGEABLE ONE-INSTRUCTOR COMPROMISE

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ABSTRACT

Individualization of Instruction in College Basic Foreign Language and Culture Courses: A Manageable One-Instructor Compromise, by Bernard J. Langr, Department of Language, University of Minnesota--Duluth, Duluth, Minnesota 55812.

Four major problems are faced by the individual college instructor who feels the need to improve instruction through change or innovation in instructional procedures: 1) The individual instructor cannot expect to bring about innovation on a broad scale, say a department or college-wide scale. 2) The material resources which the individual instructor has are normally quite limited. 3) The institution imposes certain not easily changeable limitations upon the instructor. 4) The fourth major problem is a matter of principle: The student has his own individual level of tolerance toward an instructional procedure. One recourse an instructor has in the face of these four problems is to change or innovate on less than a full scale--through compromise.

This paper is a description of the instructional program which the writer put into operation in face of the obvious need for individualization of instruction, a program which is manageable by a lone instructor, if necessary; calls for no more than the usual resources; accomodates itself to certain institutional regulations; and compromises in the matter of individualization in various manners.

INDIVIDUALIZATION OF INSTRUCTION IN COLLEGE BASIC FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE COURSES: A MANAGEABLE ONE-INSTRUCTOR COMPROMISE

Many factors entered into my decision about two years ago to invent a means whereby I could pay more than lip service to the fact that foreign language students are individuals. On the other hand, I had to recognize that even full individualization as a mode of instruction is not tolerated by all students. Hence, a compromise mode of instruction, the "options procedure".

Because using one's native language is a highly complex skill, it is fair to say that learning a second language is also highly complex and has many facets. Every language teacher recognizes that, faced with learning a second language, the students differ greatly among each other. It is probable that one will find all the following differences among students in a typical language skills class on the college level:

1. Aptitude for learning a second language.
2. Quantity of previous formal and informal learning of the second language.
3. Quality of such previous learning.
4. The discreet skill or skills which each student may have learned previously; a given student may have emphasized reading, or speaking, cultural understanding, knowledge of the grammar code, or any other element or elements of what is loosely termed as "learning Spanish".

5. Degree of motivation.

6. Goals, i.e., needs and desires.

7. Style of learning; for example, some students are sight-oriented, others are listening-oriented; some are loners, some like to work with others.

8. And, amount of study time available.

Thus the need to individualize.

There are several factors, however, which militate against total individualization of instruction. I have identified five in my teaching situation:

1. Since mandatory advanced placement is unsatisfactory, students may enter a nine-quarter sequence where they wish.

2. The "system" imposes inflexible credit, and a letter grading system, making criterion grading impractical.

3. There is only one instructor per course.

4. Individualization across courses and instructors is difficult.

5. And, there is a limited budget.

Given the need to individualize, and the limits imposed, an instructional procedure was needed which would compromise. For example, a procedure was needed whereby the student would indeed receive the usual normative grade at the end of the course, but the grades would, to at least some extent, represent effort and learning, rather than previous learning.

The procedure was intended to solve several other problems, most of which were traceable to individual differences, perhaps

best put in this way: Imagine the unfairness of a race in which the runners toward a fixed goal each have large differences in strengths and handicaps, and each starts from a different spot. One of the problems was the hesitancy which students felt toward coming into a course which was already stacked against them due to the unfair nature of the competition. Another problem was the high absentee rate. A third was the tendency to concentrate one's study on those studies which would bring about the best grades--a narrow kind of study. Thus, of course, a student would not communicate in Spanish out of class because that activity was not rewarded in the form of a higher grade. A fourth problem is related, which is that students tended to be loners, and therefore, alienated. Finally, a fifth problem was identified, that the rate of attrition between courses in the sequence was high.

Basically, the options procedure is very simple. The instructor determines the goals for the course, and then sets up a limited number of tasks by which the instructor feels students may reach the goals. To each task the instructor assigns a number of points upon any basis which he sees fit. For example, he may assign five points per period of class attendance, up to 100 points for a large unit examination, one point for every 10 minutes of communication in Spanish outside of class, two points per computerized Spanish grammar drill, 200 points for a contracted project of the student's own choice, etc. The variety of tasks one can propose is probably limited only to a small extent by lack of resources, and of course, by lack of imagination.

As the instructor makes up the tasks, he should keep several things in mind:

1. Experience shows that there should be a maximum to the number of points a student may earn on any option. This effectively prevents a few students from "raising the curve" beyond the reach of the less able.

2. Not all tasks are easily evaluated; one takes a risk, for example, that student may ask for points for a task which he did not actually accomplish. In my opinion, one should take this risk when confronted with desireable tasks or learnings, and, it is not impossible to find means of minimizing t.e risks.

3. One more item to keep in mind is that by putting maximums upon points which may be earned from each option, by limiting the number of options, and by relatively increasing the point reward on those options which the instructor wishes the students to choose above others, the instructor may manipulate the emphasis in the course.

Once the options have been determined, essentially what remains is that the students choose their options, choosing any or all of the options, and as much of any option that they wish, up to the maximum; they earn their points; and, the instructor records the points. At the end of the quarter it is a simple task to add points, tally them on a curve, and assign grades.

This completes a picture of the options procedure which I have used since its inception in Winter of 1974 in approximately 12 classes of beginning and intermediate Spanish classes, and an

applied linguistics class. Several undesireable features have come to light since the procedure was begun:

1. The first among these undesireable features was that record keeping can be a great deal of work for the instructor. However, it can be kept to a minimum by a number of strategies, among them that the number of options offered can be curtailed; student volunteers may record all points for an option or two; the number of separate elements within an option may be curtailed--for example, under a "quizes" option, less quizes may be given; the students may keep a record of their own points on certain options; and the instructor may stockpile points from an option and record them all at once.

2. Cheating on reporting of points earned was perhaps the most prominent undesireable feature during the first quarter of operation. This can be minimized, however, by exhortations that the students learn to discipline themselves in this matter (and they generally respond positively to exhortation). Cheating can also be minimized by requesting written affidavits from the students that they have indeed done the work; by maximizing the number of options where cheating is not a factor; and by setting cut-off dates for a given option.

3. Several students complained at the end of the first quarter of operation that they could not compete for a high grade in the course because they did not have as much time to work and study as other students. This problem was effectively solved by setting a maximum number of points which may be earned for the course.

4. Another instructor voiced the concern that the students will study too narrowly by choosing only easy options or choosing only one or two options. This objection, however, is invalid, because the options are limited in such a way that the student who does not do most of the available options is destined to do very poorly in the course. One of the most desireable features of the point procedure is, of course, that a student may not "rest on his laurels"; he must produce to get credit.

5. Finally, the objection was voiced that the students would probably not do as well on what can be termed the usual subject matter of the course, since they are putting in time on other options. Indeed, the students did less well on core material, as shown one quarter by comparison on tests from a previous class. However, the options procedure students had a greater range of experiences than the traditional group. For example, the traditional group probably did no reading in English and Spanish outside of the core of the course, while the students in the options procedure averaged 8.7 hours of such reading.

There are some very desireable results of the options procedure:

1. The results of the formal University of Minnesota Student Opinion Survey, a course evaluation administered on several occasions, are consistently favorable.

2. The students (to their consternation) apparently do a greater amount of work for this course than in a traditional course, and they experience a greater range of activities such as

associating with, working with, and interacting with classmates.

3. The most obvious positive result is that the students attend Spanish Table much more frequently than before. Spanish Table is an informal, voluntary, daily conversation group which gives students an opportunity to practice oral-aural language outside of class and to get over their natural inhibitedness in using the language. Records for the last two quarters show an average weekly attendance rate of 48, compared to a rate of between five and eight in previous quarters.

4. In general, the absentee rate has declined substantially.

5. In my opinion, the evidence is already strong that there is a positive correlation between the options procedure and the decreasing attrition rate.

In summary, the instructional procedure described here is indeed, from the student's point of view, a compromise mode for individualizing instruction and learning. The student takes part in traditional college language classes, but yet he has some choices in the form of study he will do out of class. The student must produce to get credit, but he has the opportunity to choose or reject some learning tasks because they do or do not fit his perceived goals, or because he can or cannot tolerate the style of learning which the individual tasks represent. He may choose to do all or some of the options; he may do as much of each option as he wishes. The student has no choice about receiving a normative grade for the course; but, the unfairness of the competition has been considerably lessened. The student

has a full opportunity to choose whichever course in the language learning sequence he wishes to enter, but once in that course, he must work to get credit; he may not "rest on his laurels". And, as in any course, the student may commit a lot of his time or little of it to the course, and never is an extreme amount required.

There is also a great deal of compromise from the point of view of the instructor or the institution. For example, the options procedure removes some of the pressure to make advanced placement necessary. The instructor must still assign grades, but it is a simple, fairly objective procedure. It is gratifying to the instructor and to the institution that partial individualization is taking place, yet there are only normal or usual costs in materials and instructional time.

Having found an instructional procedure that is workable, manageable by one instructor, and at least partially individualized, I intend to stick with it because of what it does to my morale and that of the students. The students feel that they are no longer entering a highly unfair competitive situation. The lesser competition allows a much more relaxed and cooperative relationship among students. The objective grading system allows for a relaxed atmosphere between student and instructor. The students feel that they have at least some choices. Thus, the students are more likely to enter the course and remain in the sequence, which in turn pleases me and the institution.